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SUBJECT: ENGAGING THOUSANDS - KUWAIT'S INTERNATIONAL BOOK
FAIR

¶1. SUMMARY: The Embassy participated in Kuwait's 30th International Book Fair, organized by the National Council of Culture, Arts and Letters, from November 24 to December 2, 2005. Most of the tens of thousands of visitors were conservative Muslims accompanied by family members. Public Affairs staff and other Embassy Officers at the U.S. booth engaged Kuwaiti visitors by promoting study in the U.S., explaining American society, and offering tips on learning English. Media criticism of the fair, specifically fingering the Information Ministry's banning of books, purportedly led to fewer customers this year compared to in 2004, principally a lower turnout of liberals. The only western mission represented, the U.S. booth sold nearly 600 books, exceeding the prior year's sales, and increased public distribution of IIP materials. END SUMMARY

Small Footprint -- Great Presence

¶2. The Embassy's three-meter square booth featured attractive displays of IIP books, brochures, InfoUSA CD-ROMs, "Hi" magazine and copies of e-Journals "See You in the U.S.A." and "College and University Education in the United States." Arabic translations of American titles from Regional Book Offices (RBOs) in Amman and Cairo covered the walls. Officers and FSNs handed visitors "Tsunami" brochures and Avian Flu fact sheets, or articles from the Washington File, while discussing pertinent U.S. policies. Embassy staff also distributed locally produced bookmarks touting web sites for "Hi," Al Hurra, Radio Sawa, and USInfo.state.gov, along with Study in the U.S. brochures, and web resources cards. English Teaching Forum magazine and other English teaching materials were also fast movers. This year, the booth featured two attention-grabbing six-foot tall banners underscoring the "Study in the U.S." and "See You in the U.S." themes. AMIDEAST also took part in the Embassy's booth, counseling students and distributing hundreds of educational advising materials.

English and Arabic Best Sellers

¶3. The Embassy booth sold 588 books -- 111 books in English and 477 Arabic titles. The top three best-selling books in English were:

- 1-"Outline of American History"
- 2-"Arts in America"
- 3-"An Early American Reader"

The top-three selling Arabic books were:

- 1-"Outline of American History"
- 2-"Outline of American Government"
- 3-"Law 101 (U.S. Legal Systems)"

IIP's "Outline" series on Economics and American Literature also were top sellers. Staff handed out 200 copies (100 in English, 100 in Arabic) of "Muslim Life in America" and "Portrait of the U.S.A.," which were extremely popular.

Winning over Target Audiences

¶4. Of the 30-40,000 visitors, hundreds were students from government schools who attended via morning field trips. While Radio Sawa played in the background, students perused titles, collected bookmarks, and sought educational counseling. Teachers bought copies of "Outline of American History" for their classrooms. One teacher stated that reading the book improved his idea of America and he wanted to share that with his students. The fair proved to be the ideal environment for Public Affairs staff and EmbOffs to meet and potentially influence thousands of Kuwaitis.

Embassy-wide Participation

¶5. Political and Economics Officers, AMIDEAST personnel, and the Senior English Language Fellow joined the Public Affairs Section at the fair, engaging visitors on topics ranging from English language study and visas to political parties and university campus life in the U.S. A conspicuously placed PowerPoint presentation on Public Affairs and AMIDEAST programs ran on a loop during the event, publicizing Department initiatives active in Kuwait. In an environment heavily dominated by huge Persian and Arabic Islamic publishing houses dispensing mounds of religious and children's books, the humble U.S. booth was the only western mission represented at the fair. The British and Canadian embassies, which had been present in

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2004, shied away from this year's exhibition.

Soft Opening

¶6. Minister of Commerce and Industry, Abdullah Al-Taweel inaugurated Kuwait's 30th International Book Fair. In 2004, the ceremony featured the Minister of Information, who delivered a comprehensive speech on the importance of culture. In 2005, the Minister of Commerce and Industry cut the ribbon with little fanfare, no speech, and a modest photo up, suggesting a diminished profile for the fair.

"Hi" Magazine and Radio Sawa Outreach

¶7. Free copies of "Hi" were broadly distributed to customers, many of whom were already fans. "It's my favorite magazine" said a young Kuwaiti girl. However, one woman, conservatively dressed in nikab [face covering], visited the booth with her husband and sharply criticized the fact that Lebanese singer Nancy Ajram graced the cover. She screamed at staff, "You are taking people away from their religion!" The majority of visitors, however, were delighted to receive copies of "Hi," reporting that the Nancy Ajram issue was their favorite. Throughout the fair, the U.S. booth greeted visitors with the music of Radio Sawa that played in the background to positive reviews.

Media Objects to Banned Books

¶8. The book fair drew intense criticism from the Kuwaiti press corps. Critics complained that book fairs in most other countries improve year over year, but this was not the case in Kuwait. Detractors added that each year Kuwaiti authorities ban more books in deference to conservative Islamist pressures. A cartoon in widely read Al-Watan Arabic daily, made fun of the draft press law

currently under consideration, stating, "Now, the Ministry of Information will have more free time to ban children's book from the book fair." [Note: Children's books are highly valued and sought after at the fair. The Embassy has no data corroborating an increase in the banning of books other than the fact that two books from our collection were barred, as described below.]

Two U.S. Titles Banned

¶9. Two RBO Cairo selections were excluded: "Scuds or Butter? The Political Economy of Arms Control in the Middle East" by Yahya Sadowsky, and "Point of No Return: The Deadly Struggle for Middle East Peace" by Geoffrey Kemp and Jeremy Pressman. Presumably, the Ministry of Information censored them due to content about Israel.

Press Coverage

¶10. The Embassy's booth was the only operation that received significant press coverage in Kuwait Times (11/23/05, English, p. 3, 1/4 page, 1 photo, circ. 35,000) as a result of the opening ceremony. The photograph showed the Charg d'Affaires presenting a book during the grand opening to the Director General of the National Council, the Kuwaiti entity that organized the fair.

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